

An eyewitness testimony scenario

The witnesses were all customers sitting upstairs in a coffee shop. Two men had an altercation in which they started raising their voices in a dispute of some sort. While people's attention was distracted one or more people removed purses/wallets/phones from some customers' jackets and bags. One customer noticed what was happening and loudly shouted, 'What are you doing?!' At that point, the two men who had been 'arguing' suddenly jumped up and grabbed two items from one of the tables, an orange purse and an iPhone. They ran out down the stairs, accompanied by at least one other person, passing two other people who were already going downstairs. The suspects then ran out of the coffee shop.

The police arrived very quickly after the manager triggered the store alarm because they were already near the shop. An inexperienced officer went upstairs and started asking people who were still in the room what had happened. He took down notes of what the different witnesses said. One of the questions he asked was 'at what point did the man in the red cap steal the purse?'

Later on, the witnesses went separately to the police to give a statement. The police followed the standard police interview approach. By now the police had identified a number of suspects. Some of the witnesses were shown photographs of the suspects and asked if they recognised them. On a subsequent occasion some of the witnesses were invited to an identification parade, where they were asked to pick some of the suspects out of the line up. The identifications they made ended up being used in court when the suspects were charged and prosecuted.

Possible points of analysis

Features generally relevant to EWT

1. Witnesses were (deliberately) distracted during the crime - they can't encode what they haven't attended to (multi-store model; Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968).
2. It wasn't clear to the witnesses how many people ran out of the shop, as they passed some other people on the stairs - there is potential for witnesses to encode bystanders as suspects (or vice versa), leading to schema-driven errors later (Bartlett; Loftus).
3. The police arrived quickly. Recall may be enhanced by recency effects (Murdoch, 1962 and related studies).
4. The event may have been both unexpected and emotionally arousing, leading to the formation of a flashbulb memory (Brown & Kulik, 1976). However, (1) the level of emotional arousal might have been too low for a FB memory; and (2) some dispute whether FB memories actually exist as such (Neisser, 1992).
5. Generally, police, jurors and judges start from the assumption that witnesses are likely to be correct. It may be more appropriate to start from the assumption that they are likely to be incorrect, and view all EWT with scepticism (Yarney, 2004).

Features specific to post-event information

1. Witnesses saw one suspect take the orange purse and the iPhone. These actions are central to what happened, so less affected by post-event information (Sutherland & Hayne 2001).
2. Witnesses were questioned together. The testimony of other witnesses is an important source of post-event information, leading to schema driven errors and source-monitoring errors (Lyndsay, 1994; more here: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.465.8366&rep=rep1&type=pdf>)
3. Officer asked leading questions which introduce the idea of the 'red cap' and by the use of 'steal' may activate inappropriate schemas regarding the identity and actions of suspects (Loftus; Bartlett).
4. Witnesses were shown photographs of suspects before the identification parade. This raises the problem of source-monitoring errors, as witnesses may positively identify suspects because they have seen their photographs before, not because they remember them from the incident.

General discussion points

Early EWT research relied heavily on laboratory studies using artificial stimuli like photographs and videos - problems with ecological validity.

Some studies have used real witnesses and real crimes (e.g. Yuille and Cutshall, 1986). Where the lab studies and the field studies conflict, who do we believe? There is a trade-off between realism and sampling validity/control etc.